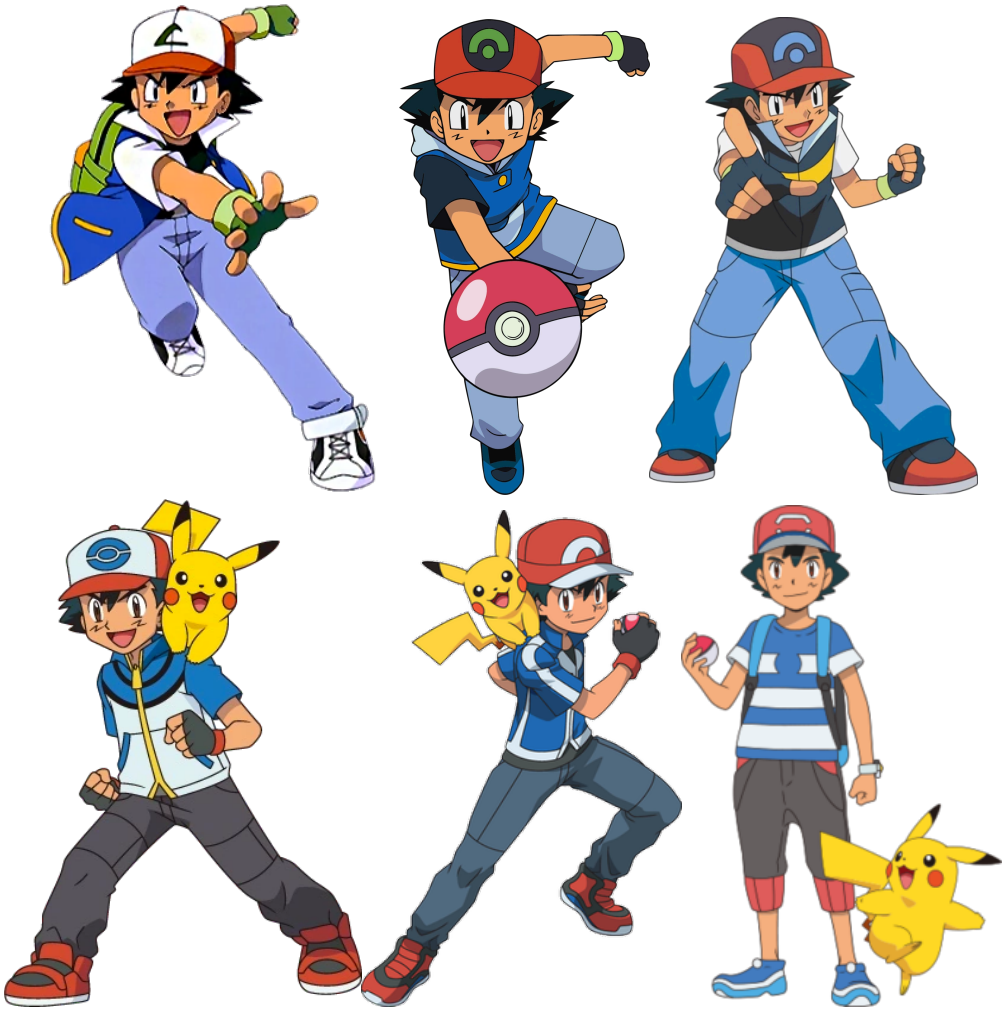


LEST THE EARTH SHALL TURN TO ASH
Ash Ketchum TF
Twinning TG AR Weight Loss
Inanimate to Animate
(Pika Pika)

The year is 2047- the not-so-distant future. Technology has advanced dramatically. People don't have flying cars, but they have advanced virtual reality, smartphones that make the 2010-era smartphones seem like dumb-phones, and- of course- transformation technology.

That's right. With enough money, people can turn into anyone or anything they want. Sometimes their mind changes to match their real form. Other times, their mind stays the same. Most people engage in temporary changes for fun, just to see what it's like. VR, however, proved to be cheaper, and so that became the go-to entertainment for the common man.

But others have nefarious reasons for changing people. Hiding from the law, for example (oh!- how easy is that when you're just a cactus?). Then you get your serial transformers, who change people in order to rid them of their original personalities. Maybe they're crazy, or they want revenge, or they just love watching people squirm.

But then, of course, there is the ever-timeless motivation of money.

There are those who will take jobs from others with the goal of changing people. These "TF mercenaries", as they are so often called, change people with a wide array of tricks and tech in order to obtain a plentiful sum from the people who hired them. Most of their bosses are scum- mob bosses, drug lords and their ilk.

But a respectable business like Nintendo? That's another story.

Nintendo still exists, of course. In a technologically advanced world such as this one, they only became a bigger and more powerful company. But not all of their IPs have bene doing well. The immortal Mario and Zelda series are doing great, but Pokemon- currently on Generation Eighteen- is starting to see a decline. Why? No-one knows. Some blame the bland designs of newer Pokemon. Others just think they can't keep the games themselves fresh anymore.

Nintendo wished to save Pokemon from certain doom. So they hired a TF mercenary, and this is where the story starts.

"You want me to what now?" asked a rather plain man with brown hair, his eyes hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses.

"Create some advertising for us," the Japanese man behind the chrome desk repeated.

The room these two men occupied was as fancy as it was shiny. The walls and floor shone silver, but the furniture- save for the desk- was made of old-fashioned wood or leather. The brown-haired man was seated on a rather comfortable chair, where he fidgeted with uncertainty.

"Look," he said. "I don't know who you think I am, but taking a job like this is insane. It's the dumbest job I've ever received, to be frank."

"On the contrary- it's the most important job you've ever received," the Japanese man said. "As you were told, the Pokemon anime petered out around the seventh generation of games. But many people fondly remember the characters from childhood. We need you to bring those characters to life, to get people interested in the Pokemon franchise again."

"Yea, I heard that, but you want me to just change random people?" the brown-haired man inquired.

"No," the Japanese man replied. "We have targets."

Here, the Japanese man handed his American 'friend' a small smartphone. The brown-haired man snatched it away, then looked through it for a time, memorizing the names of his targets. All of them appeared to be a relative or friend of important figures in rival gaming companies. Why the important figures themselves weren't being

targeted was no mystery to the brunet- they would have too much security for him to reach them. So- in their place- the people closest to them were his soon-to-be victims.

"I see, I see," the brown haired man said. "But why are they all going to become the same character with different hats?"

"That character is the most famous of all our human creations," the Japanese man explained. "Therefore, we can spread his influence all over the place." The brown-haired man just looked up at the Japanese man incredulously. "We'll also pay you ten million in your currency," he added hurriedly.

A smile appeared on the brown-haired man's lips. "Why didn't you say that to begin with?" he asked. "All right. As dumb as this entire mission is, I- the Hunter- will not let you down."

The Hunter was many things. "Greedy" was one word you could use to describe him. So was "merciless". "Lazy" was not usually one of those words, but the Hunter found this task so stupid that he wanted to do it as quickly as possible.

It took two days after his meeting in Japan and to return to America for him to figure it out. "Of course," he said. "I'll get the victims to change each other. All I have to do is alter the transformation instructions slightly so they want to spread their new form around. Then, I only need to change one of them and let that person do all the work for me while I move on to real jobs."

The Hunter used a random number generator online to choose his single victim, then set out to do his job.

Victim 1
HANA TACHIKAWA, AGE 19
DAUGHTER OF A SQUARE-ENIX EXEC.

In the future, there are still cars, buses and boats. But- for long-distance travel- the airplane is obsolete. The teleporter has taken its place. In seconds, one can go from America to Japan and back again, where it previously took hours by plane. It was this mechanism the Hunter used to take his job and go back home through.

The teleporter stations are reminiscent of the subway crossed with an airport. Though they offer many shops and restaurants, the floors are dirty, it's often crowded and the line to get into the teleporter is dreadfully long. Waits take longer than actual trips, sometimes going up to three hours.

The Hunter was at the New York teleport station, which was a bit filthier than most. This disgusted his first and only victim. Hana Tachikawa was a slim girl of Japanese decent. She was practically obsessed with pink. Pink blouse? Check. Pink

skirt? Check. Even a necklace made of pink micro-crystals? Check. She fumbled a bit with her unwieldy pink luggage bag as she approached the Hunter.

Oh, how easy it had been to lure her here. The Hunter sent her a text- an easy task since he had all the victim's cell phone numbers- saying he was offering a free trip to America. She was told to teleport to New York and look for a brown-haired man in sunglasses and a dark coat, who would help arrange everything- from food to hotels to even the teleport back home. As it turned out, she'd never been to the US before, and quickly hopped in the teleporter to retrieve her prize. Now, she was approaching her "contact", unaware that he had different plans in mind for her than a vacation.

"So," Hana asked him, her English fluent but her accent betraying her heritage. "Are you the one who sent me the text?"

The Hunter nodded, his expression stern. He was hiding a big, shit-eating grin. Too easy! This was too easy!

"Yes, I am," he said. "Come this way."

The two of them darted in and out of the busy crowds. It was more crowded here than it was in the Tokyo teleport station, a fact which Hana quickly picked up on. She scanned the crowds, rolling her cute luggage bag behind her. They left the building and the Hunter hailed a cab, which took them towards his residence.

Not once did Hana suspect anything, and this would prove to be her downfall.

The Hunter's home was modest on the outside, resembling a large but old-fashioned house from the 2010 era. It was fairly secluded in the woods in New York state. The cab only took them part of the way. After that, it was an uphill hike. Hana complained the whole way about her feet, in no small part due to her high heels. The Hunter gritted his teeth in frustration at her whining, but remained silent.

By the time they passed through the creaky wooden door and entered the spacious living room, Hana was starting to feel a bit on edge. She realized for the first time that she was alone in the middle of nowhere with this strange man. As soon as the Hunter turned and locked the door, she dropped her luggage with a clatter and reached for her cell phone. She knew this country's emergency number and dialed it quickly.

"So you aren't as dumb as I thought," the Hunter said. "Relax. I won't hurt you."

Hana's finger hovered over the "call" button. "I'll do it," she said. "I'll call the police if you don't let me go."

"I'll let you go in a second," the Hunter said dismissively as he pulled a bronze, elaborate ray gun out of his jacket.

Hana's finger jabbed the call button just as she was struck with a ray of green light. The phone slid out of her hand and fell to the blue carpet the Hunter chose to cover the floor of his living room. Her whole body tingled, but she felt no pain. Still, she pinched her arms, trying to get rid of the tingling sensation.

"Listen to me," the Hunter said. "I have important information to give you."

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?" interrupted a voice from the dropped phone.

Sighing, the Hunter picked up the phone and hung up the call. Hana tried to move, shout, stop him in any way, but her body was frozen.

"By now, you're wondering what I did to you and why I did it," the Hunter explained. "I was hired to turn you into someone else."

Hana was about to object, but the physical changes already started. She was rather tall- especially for a Japanese woman- but now had trouble looking at the Hunter as she slid down to just under five feet. Her top slid off a bit. She tried to pull it back on, but still couldn't move. Besides, there was nothing to expose, for her breasts were replaced with the flat chest of a male. Her eyes lost focus as she entered a state of heightened suggestibility.

The Hunter turned away from the frozen girl, not really caring about her breasts or lack thereof. He'd done this so many times that he honestly lost his original fascination with the changes. So he just kept speaking, setting his plan into motion.

"I speak the truth. Your name is Ash Ketchum," the Hunter explained, wincing a little at how stupid the second sentence sounded to his ears. "You are ten years old. You have always been ten years old. Now, listen, Ash. You are going to be given an important mission."

Hana- no, Ash- nodded slowly as her body lit up with animated color. Her face restructured itself to that of a young boy with large, anime eyes, with two small z-marks appearing on her cheeks.

"See, you are alone now. You want brothers- other Ash Ketchums, just like yourself," the Hunter explained with false sympathy. "Someone turned you into a girl by the name of Hana Tachikawa, but I'm turning you back. When you are finished returning to your original self, I will give you more instructions. You will follow all of my instructions to the letter. Is that understood?"

Ash nodded as his shoulders broadened ever so slightly. The pink getup he entered the house in transformed into muddy jeans, a black t-shirt and a blue jacket. His luggage opened up on its own, split like an amoeba and morphed into a green backpack, a red and white hat with a green check mark on it and five PokeBalls.

All that remained was a jacket made of pink faux fur, and even that was changing. The fur turned yellow and rose up from the ground with a life of its own. Pointed ears poked out of it, followed by four little paws and a lightning-bolt tail made from the fused-together sleeves. It wobbled a bit as it became alive, stuffing replaced with lungs, a beating heart and- most importantly- two electric sacs on either side of its new "face". Two beady black eyes, a tiny nose and a mouth all appeared as the "jacket" became animated like its owner.

"Pikachu," the newborn Pokemon droned, under the same spell as his Trainer.

Ash looked down at his belongings and Pikachu friend, not noticing his gender physically swap from female to male. The high heels that caused so much trouble on the way to the house became yellowed canvas. The heels fell off, no longer needed as they were now plain black and white sneakers. The force of the short fall snapped Ash out of his trance.

"Whoa!" Ash cried out. He looked around at his unfamiliar surroundings, then down at his Pokemon. "Pikachu? Pikachu! What's wrong?"

"Pika," was the monotone reply.

Turning to the Hunter- the only other person in the room, Ash shouted, "What did you do to Pikachu?"

The Hunter smiled. The mental transformation was complete. Ash was more concerned about the electric rat than with anything Hana would be reasonably worried about in this situation. He didn't even question how Pikachu got there.

“I have instructions for you,” the Hunter said.

“Instructions?” Ash asked. “I won’t listen to yo- follow them to the letter.”

Ash dropped back into his trance, standing at attention. The Hunter allowed himself to grin a little, then began to give out his orders.

“I am going to help you find your brothers,” the Hunter explained. “They are currently trapped in the bodies and identities of other people. I am going to give you a cell phone with the identities of these people, along with a few gadgets to help you free your brothers. All of your brothers share your name- Ash Ketchum.

“You are not to use any of the implements I give you on me, nor are you to attack me with any of your Pokemon. In addition, you are only to use the objects I give you on these five people. When I snap my fingers, you and Pikachu will awaken from your trance and accept this as your reality.”

Satisfied that the Hunter covered all of his bases, he snapped his fingers. Ash and Pikachu both started, then looked around, a wave of sadness filling them both since their brothers were missing.

“Mister,” Ash asked. “Where are my brothers? Can you help me find them?”

The Hunter softened at the pure sorrow in the boy’s voice, but only for a very short moment. “Of course,” he replied. “Right this way.”

Victim 2
BRAD JETSON, AGE 32
CLOSE FRIEND OF AN EXEC. OF SONY CORPORATION OF AMERICA

The home console made a decline in recent years, with public arcades making a comeback. Of course- instead of guiding Pac-Man around a maze- the public enjoyed virtual reality games.

Brad was at one of these arcades, doing a favor for one of his friends. He didn’t really work for Sony, which made him the perfect choice to scope out the competition. What games were doing well? Why were they doing well? All of this and more was to be catalogued and reported to Sony.

Brad didn’t look out of place at the arcade at all. He was overweight with glasses, which was geeky enough on its own. But then, there was his curly red hair, bloated cheeks and active choice to wear suspenders and a bow tie instead of the more trendy, shiny clothes of the modern era that firmly placed him in the “nerd” category.

In reality, Brad was less “geek” and more “unfettered”, doing whatever he wanted. If he wanted to dress that way, then who cared? Not him- that was for sure. His only issue was finding replacements when the old clothes wore out, as they were becoming increasingly scarce.

Everything around Brad was shiny and new. He was investigating one of the more popular machines, which took the shape of a black and white bear with a single, menacing red eye. The people wearing the virtual reality helmets attached to it would scream in terror occasionally. It was clearly some kind of horror game, but what kind,

Brad did not know. He was hiding somewhat behind the machine, investigating its features from afar.

He was so wrapped up in his work that he did not know what was coming for him.

A ten-year-old boy and his Pikachu friend approached Brad from behind, being careful not to make a sound. Over the past couple of hours, Ash had received gear from the Hunter, located his first brother and flew to Newark, New Jersey on the back of his faithful Charizard. There had been a bit of a scare when he landed, but he was able to recall Charizard to his PokeBall and run away before any questions could be asked.

It took several hours to find Brad, but- once he did- tailing him was not a problem. Now, it was a matter of getting him alone.

“Excuse me?” Ash asked, breaking his silence.

Brad started at the voice that seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place how. The bear machine was ignored for the time being as he turned around. Brad took in the sight before him. Transformed people were common, but to see a full-blooded cartoon character? That was rare. That took skill.

It was freaking him out.

Brad squealed like a greased pig and ran like one, too, bolting out of the arcade. He turned several heads as he made his exit.

“Wait!” Ash cried, following him outside.

Brad was starting to get away, but Ash wouldn’t allow that. He had to free his brother. Throwing a PokeBall with expert aim, he summoned his trusty Snorlax, who landed with a thud between Brad and freedom. Patrons in the area screamed and fled and the Pokemon lazily said its name.

Brad glanced around, trying to find and escape route. To his east was the road, which was a rather busy road filled with fast cars and texting drivers. To his west was a small alleyway. Brad darted down the alley, his ten-year-old pursuer following with Pikachu on his shoulder. Snorlax realized what was going on and sealed off the exit to the alley, leaving everyone within well and trapped.

Brad’s sprint slowed to a stop when he saw a holographic fence before him. It was the kind that sent a mild electric current through anyone who touched it, and did worse to anyone who tried to climb it. It wasn’t like he could climb it with his build, anyway. He panted, out of breath and totally helpless.

Ash and Pikachu approached Brad slowly. They moved almost too slowly. Brad burst into a cold sweat as he noticed the green object in Ash’s hand. It clearly wasn’t a PokeBall.

“C’mon, man,” Brad panted. “Let’s talk. Huh? Let’s have a little talk about this.”

“I’m not gonna talk with anyone who’s keeping my brother prisoner,” Ash replied.

“Brother? Wait, what’s going o-” Brad began to question, but he never finished.

The green object hit Brad right in the face. It began to leak thick smoke as the outer shell dissolved. Ash backed away from the cloud, as if he didn’t know the smoke bomb’s full range. But it proved not to be an ordinary smoke bomb as Brad’s body quivered, fat slowly melting away like wax dripping off of a candle. His hair remained coarse, but went from red and curly to black and spiky. Chubby cheeks slimmed down, giving way to an anime-style face.

“What’s happening to me?” Brad asked, his voice breathy.

“Your name is Ash Ketchum,” Ash said. “You are my brother. Please, try to remember.”

“That’s crazy! I ne- brother,” Brad gasped, his voice turning into a perfect replica of the one belonging to the cartoon boy in front of him.

The mental conditioning seized his mind as his clothing morphed. A blue vest with a hoodie and a black t-shirt replaced his geeky getup. His dress pants were replaced with jeans. Black and blue sneakers replaced the simple black shoes he originally wore. Brad studied his shoes thoughtfully as thoughts of training Pokemon and finding his brothers began to erase his old thoughts, fears and personality.

The smoke bomb even affected some of the trash in a nearby dumpster. A pot, a long piece of string and worn stuffed bear all flew out and landed at the new Ash’s feet. The pot turned from metal to fabric and the handle turned to a wide brim, forming a red and black ball cap with a green logo. The string broadened as well, turning into a leather belt.

Just like the original Ash, he had five PokeBalls to his name, each holding a Pokemon. Sceptile, Swellow, Torkoal, Corphish, Glalie. The names came back to the transforming boy one by one as his skin brightened and lost all blemishes, taking on an animated quality. Yes, yes, they were all there. But where was-

“Pika!” the bear chirped, its mouth moving of its own accord.

The bear rose to its feet, shabby brown fur turning yellow and bright. Its ears pulled up like taffy as it fumbled clumsily with its paws. The short, stubby tail it once possessed was stretched as well, replaced by a lightning bolt. Soon, a second Pikachu stood in the alleyway.

Meanwhile, the original Ash looked on silently. Ash: prime- as he now felt he should be called- knew from what the Hunter told him that there were additional orders to give. Brad was about ninety-eight percent Ash now, so Ash: prime had to try and remember what to say.

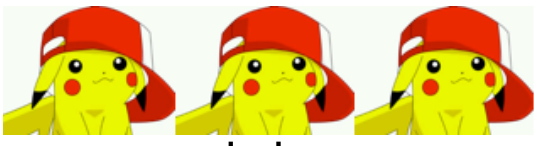
“Um, there’s only four more people to change,” Ash: prime explained. “We can’t attack some guy named the Hunter. And um, that’s about it. Are you ready to help free our brothers?”

As the transformation concluded, Brad- now Ash: beta- blinked and rubbed his much larger eyes. “Yes,” he said, his more youthful voice shaking a bit as the smoke finally disappeared. “But where are they? How do we get there?”

“I can fly us wherever we need to go on Charizard’s back,” Ash: prime explained.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Ash: beta said cheerfully.

Two were down, and only four remained.



Victim 3
STAN WATSON, AGE 26
SON OF A CREATOR OF A COMPANY THAT HELPS INDEPENDENT GAME MAKERS

If there was one thing Stan hated, it was his father.

His father was the owner of Games4Games, which helped independent game makers get their start. This seemed to be a noble cause, but Stan knew his father was a greedy man, and he charged outrageous prices for his services- sometimes more than it took to produce the games themselves. Those who could pay their way in would be handsomely rewarded, as the Games4Games products tended to sell well.

Still, a pay wall was a pay wall, and it infuriated Stan to no end.

So why was Stan currently wandering the streets of Chicago? Simple- he quit the small job his father gave him due to their constant fights and was striking out on his own. No-one really paid him much attention. He was your average blond-haired, blue eyed young man. Even his clothes were made of plain old holo-chrome fabric instead of the fancier stuff his father preferred. The shiny fabric squeaked a bit as he walked. He mused that he might need a replacement shirt soon, adjusting his glasses as he did so.

That's when Stan saw a sign on a phone booth. Yes, a real phone booth, made of blue metal. The sign was written in sloppy pen and read, "Free Job! Ask Inside!"

All the alarm bells were going off in Stan's head, but he decided to check it out. At the very least, he could laugh at how stupid this publicity stunt was to his friends alter. Besides, he really did need a job. So he entered, not knowing a few key details.

The phone booth was not always a phone booth. It was an old VR machine that Ash: prime and Ash: beta found in the trash the night before. With help from Charizard and Snorlax, they dragged it to this very spot and used a special transformation ray to change it into its current form. The ray was then placed inside the phone booth. The Hunter's data told them all about Stan's financial woes, which gave them the idea to set up this particular trap.

But Stan didn't know any of this. How could he have? He just saw an old-fashioned phone booth that fell out of the nineties. As he investigated more, he heard a squeak beneath his foot. Looking down, he sighed. There was an old squeaky toy for a dog in the phone booth. It was in relatively good condition, so Stan figured someone else fell for this scam and left it here. He left it alone and turned to the phone, which had a sign scrawled in pen on it.

"'For Job, Insert Coin'," Stan read aloud. "This is so dumb, but I really need the money."

Stan fished a quarter out of his pocket- for no-one used any coins worth less than quarters any more- and pushed it into the slot on the phone. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Just as Stan was about to throw his hands up and leave, the phone rang. He picked the phone up and asked, "Hello?"

The ray hidden in the phone triggered.

All Stan felt was a zap, which didn't hurt, but left an unpleasant tingling sensation. He growled and hung up the phone. Of course it did nothing! What a waste of time! He kicked the dog toy in frustration, which went sailing out of the phone booth. Fluff and stitching immediately turned to fur and ink as the stubby dog tail became a lighting bolt shape.

"Pikachu!" the third Pikachu chirped as he began to run down the street.

"Oh shit," Stan muttered.

The phone booth was a transformation trap. He just knew it. He dug into his pocket to get his phone and call 911, but came away with a handful of tiny, red and white balls. Stan stared at them for a minute, put them back where he found them, then

looked back at the Pikachu, who gestured for him to follow before bolting further down the street.

Stan figured that the electric mouse would lead him right to the perpetrators. Then he could deal with them- somehow. He didn't know how, but he'd figure something out. He didn't notice the first stage of the transformation beginning, and the Stan that emerged from the phone booth was now animated, just like Pikachu.

Stan followed the Pikachu down the metaphorical rabbit hole as his world began to turn blurry. He blinked his brown eyes- Were they always that big? Damn these crooks!- as he tried to refocus. His clothes began to swallow him as he shrunk, making him nearly trip a few times. They were far too big when the shrinking stopped, for Stan was very tall to begin with.

Fortunately, the changes knew this, in a sense. The holo-chrome shirt was replaced with older, cotton fabric- a black and yellow vest over a white shirt. His jeans didn't change too much, save for becoming a bit more shabby, as if worn by travel. Black and red sneakers replaced his shoes.

Now able to freely move, Stan wondered where the hell his hat went, and if the Pikachu would even- wait. Hat? As if in response to his thoughts, a red, black and blue baseball cap appeared on his head. Okay, that solved that problem, but could he really find the criminals and get changed back by following a cartoon rodent?

Pikachu approached a McDonald's as Stan's changes wrapped up, his short blond hair growing black, spiky and coarse. People around him stared, but said nothing. It was, after all, his bad luck to get transformed. They shouldn't butt into it. However, one woman- slightly bolder than the rest of the sheep- pulled a phone out of her pocket and began to call the police.

Stan didn't notice her. He just kept going. His Pikachu took a seat on one of the outside tables, where two other Pikachus and two other Ashes were sitting around.

"Hi, Ash!" one of the Ashes cried out.

Stan's old personality melted away upon hearing his name, without giving up much of a fight. He was Ash: gamma now, and he was hungry. Fortunately, his brothers had ordered a Big Mac for him. They were even thoughtful enough to get French fries and ketchup for Pikachu.

His stomach growled. He remembered being worried about something, but it could wait.

A few minutes after he began to eat, the sound of police sirens filled the air. "Oh no!" Ash: beta cried. "Should we do something about them?"

"The Hunter said-" Ash: prime began, but Ash: gamma wasn't listening. He noticed that Ash: beta pulled a transformation bomb out of his pocket. Thinking it was a normal smoke bomb, he got an idea.

A police cruiser pulled up to the McDonald's with a screech. Three policemen filed out. "Okay, okay, hands up!" barked an older man with salt-and-pepper hair.

Ash: gamma took the smoke bomb from Ash: beta and grinned. He lobbed it at the police, then shouted, "Run!" to his fellows.

Ash: prime looked unamused, but he still summoned his Charizard. The three boys and the three Pikachus boarded the orange dragon with some difficulty. They then took off, their meals forgotten.

Little did they know, everyone in the area- from cop to bystander- was starting to shrink, turn animated and grow black, spiky hair. Their minds also morphed to their new calling- to free their brothers.

Victim 4
WANDA RIDDLE, AGE 42
COUSIN OF A BIGWIG AT MICROSOFT

Wanda hated traffic with every fiber of her being.

She was a portly woman in her forties, with glasses to help correct her vision, a curly blond wig to hide her early balding and absolutely nothing to help with the lineup of cars stretching from here to kingdom come. Some drivers were texting or lost in portable VR experiences, causing honking all around. No honker was louder or more violent than Wanda, who was about ready to explode.

Adjusting her pink dress and gripping her fuzzy steering wheel cover, she shouted to the poor sap in front of her, “Move, you buffoon! You’re going too slow! Eyes on the road! Didn’t you graduate driving school? The gas pedal is on the right!”

Wanda was so caught up in her screaming and screeching that she didn’t notice the sky darken until it was too late. The first drops of rain startled her, somehow falling through the roof of her car and onto her.

“How the hell- ugh! That was my favorite dress, you jerk!” she roared, for localized weather bombs were common pranks employed by bored teenagers.

Localized weather bombs were cheap bombs that released a certain weather condition in a given area for a set amount of time. They were commonly employed during winter for the perfect artificial white Christmas. The rest of the time, they were mere annoyances, lobbed at old men telling kids to get off their lawn.

There was, however, something Wanda only noticed after the worst of her anger subsided. This was the fact that the rain was able to penetrate the car roof. Looking out the window, she found a dark, black cloud floating above her car and her car alone. It was definitely a weather bomb of some sort. Curse those teenage brats!

But it was so much more than your average weather bomb. The rain carried a transformative effect. Unknown to Wanda, she was being watched by the three Ashes, two of whom were on Charizard’s back and one of whom was on top of Gliscor. They were obscured by the rain cloud for now, waiting patiently for results.

Wanda’s scalp began to tickle as new, black hair grew from her scalp and spiked in every direction. At the same time, the car in front of her moved forward a tiny bit, only to come to a sudden stop. The combination of these two actions made her wig fly off. The wig shuddered, the curls growing shorter as it took on the shape of a living creature. Wanda tried to grab the wig and put it back on, but it scurried to the back seat on its half-formed legs.

That’s when Wanda began to sweat nervously. It was just a wig. It couldn’t move on its own!

As the car in front of her finally decided to move properly, Wanda rolled ahead slowly, finding it more difficult to sit in the driver's seat. It was almost like she was shrinking, and she in fact was. Looking down as a new organ came into being, she let out a scream that wasn't clearly masculine or feminine. It was the scream of a child.

"How can this- what is this-" Wanda babbled, unable to string together a coherent sentence.

The rain began to subside in her car, but the damage was not done yet. A cheerful series of "Pika pika!"s in the back seat caught Wanda's attention. She found that her wig was now transformed into a Pikachu.

This wasn't VR. This wasn't a nightmare. This was reality. At that realization, her world started to spin.

As Wanda's body made the leap from real to animated, her breasts vanished, erased out of existence. Her face stretched uncomfortably but not painfully as her eyes increased in size, becoming a rich brown. Her dress split around the waist, becoming a blouse and skirt. She looked down at herself and laughed, like it was the funniest thing in the universe. Here she was, a boy wearing girl's clothes!

Wait a minute. She was a girl! Hell, she was a woman! She went right back to screaming, concerning her backseat partner. Pikachu's ears drooped sadly as two z-marks appeared under Wanda's cheeks.

"Pikachu," the little Pokemon said.

The steering wheel cover unwound itself like a snake, clenching around her waist. With audible popping sounds, five PokeBalls appeared, each carrying a Pokemon. Wanda didn't know how she knew this, nor how she knew which Pokemon was in each one. It was just foreign knowledge that entered her mind and became fact. At this point, she gave up and just let the transformation take over.

Her causal business shoes were replaced with red sneakers, while her skirt became a pair of brownish pants. Her blouse puffed up a bit and gained longer sleeves, transforming into a blue and white jacket. She felt oddly naked for a second, until her red and white cap with its blue PokeBall logo made its appearance. That's when he knew who he was. He was Ash Ketchum and- and-

And why exactly was he driving a car? Pokemon travel was more efficient.

As if on cue, Gliscor floated down to the driver's side of the car. People of course began to panic and swerve away at the sight of the giant flying scorpion monster, but Ash- or rather, Ash: delta- was unafraid. He put his belt on, gestured for Pikachu to hop on his shoulder, then opened the car door and boarded Gliscor's back. Up into the air they went, leaving behind the car of Wanda Riddle.

However, the weather bomb was still in effect. The Ashes were done with it, and so left it to taint the next car that pulled up into its sphere of influence.

Victim 5
LUCKEY PRATT, AGE 16
NEPHEW OF A FACEBOOK EXEC. WHO HELPED MAKE THE OCULUS RIFT VRXZ

The Ashes moved westward to Los Angeles, which was the home of their final two victims. They decided by unanimous vote to go after the younger of the two first, since the Hunter already supplied them with the perfect plan to convert him. They'd save their brothers yet!

That person was Luckey Pratt. His uncle worked on a marvelous VR machine that was the next form of the Oculus Rift- the VRXZ. It only had a few games available for it, but critics were already praising them, and the money was rolling in. It was this exact machine that made Nintendo seethe with jealousy, and so led to them choosing to target Luckey as part of their advertising scheme.

But Luckey was unaware of that. Instead, he just thought of himself as, well, lucky. He got to try all the new games before they came out. He didn't look like an avid gamer, though. Luckey looked like an average teen, with brown hair, blue eyes and wrinkled clothes. There wasn't too much noteworthy about him in terms of appearance, which impacted his ability to get a girlfriend.

He despised this so, but that's a tale for another time.

When Luckey came home from school one day, he found a small package wrapped in holo-foil- a shiny but durable substance that looked like aluminum foil, but was less sharp. A sticker of a Pikachu was attached to it. Above the cartoon mouse was another sticker of a word bubble that made it look like it was speaking. The words "To Luckey" were inside the word bubble.

Luckey scoffed. He used to play the Pokemon games, but they got old, as did he. Besides, the VRXZ took up all of his time now. However, he noticed that the package looked to be the same size as a VRXZ game. Taking it inside without another thought, he opened it up and confirmed his suspicions. It was a game for his beloved machine. The game was called "Frog Jump" and featured a smiling cartoon frog that was blue in color.

Was this some kind of Frogger ripoff? More importantly, why hadn't his uncle ever mentioned this game? Luckey's curiosity got the better of him in the end, and he plugged the game into his machine, all too eager to play.

The blue frog bounced in his field of vision as the game loaded. Luckey then found himself- or at least, his brain thought it found itself- in a swamp. A popup appeared in front of him.

"'Help find Frog's lost friends!'" he read aloud. "'There are four friends in the swamp, plus an extra-special friend. Each friend is worth 200 points, and the extra-special friend is worth 500 points. Collect flies for 10 points each. Avoid Pumpka and Inko! They will make you take damage! If you hit three enemies, it's game over! Frog runs in a straight line. Tilt your head to control Frog's running. Good luck! Press A to begin!' Well, that sounds easy enough."

Luckey began the game and took on the role of Frog. The character began to move at an almost stomach-churning pace, dashing through the swamp so fast that Luckey couldn't really take in the graphics. He was so absorbed in trying to get his bearings that he didn't notice that- in the outside world- his body became animated, shining bright and free of blemishes or skin pores. There weren't any other changes.

Yet.

Luckey collided with a pumpkin-like creature, which made the whole screen flash red. He kept going past it, however, only to collide with a squid seconds later. Again, the screen flashed red. Luckey grit his teeth. This game was nauseating to look at! He turned his head to the right to avoid an incoming pumpkin monster, only to hit another squid. The screen turned totally black and read, “You Died. Play again?”

“Hell yes,” Luckey grumbled, filled with an unusual amount of determination.

After running into the pumpkin and squid enemies over and over and losing over and over, Luckey was getting frustrated with the game. But he would not give up. He’d never give up! Soon, he got the hang of controlling Frog.

He was rather proud of himself when he found the first special friend- a slug-like critter. The game chimed as Luckey’s top changed from a plain black holo-chrome t-shirt to a cotton blue and white jacket. He felt an increase in heat, but couldn’t place it and didn’t want to. Only three more friends to find!

Luckey guided his frog character through a maze of pumpkins and squids. They seemed to be getting more frequent in appearance and were coming in pairs now, but Luckey was still able to navigate to a tree where he found the second friend- a small bird. His pants changed color- becoming a navy blue- while his sneakers turned red.

The game got increasingly difficult. Luckey kept whipping his head around, looking to anyone else to be a total fool. But he eventually found another friend- this time a bat. His face morphed under the VR helmet, turning anime-style and giving him big brown eyes with z-marks under them. Luckey didn’t even notice, for he was too absorbed in his game.

The last gauntlet was the hardest of all. Monsters just kept flinging themselves in Luckey’s path. But- as they kept increasing- so did Luckey’s skill in playing. All that existed to him was the never-ending onslaught of enemy creatures, which he dodged like a seasoned player. Eventually, he came across a cave with a yellow blob inside.

“You found the extra-special friend! You win! Press A now!” the game told him as his character ground to a halt.

Luckey grinned and did as instructed. The game suddenly went black as a mild zap caused him to drop the controllers he held in each hand. They melded together and grew yellow fur, with the joysticks moving to either side of their new “face”. Ears, tail and limbs all grew as the controller became the latest Pikachu in the lineup.

Luckey cursed and shouted at the game for suddenly ending without any resolution. He didn’t notice his hair change color, becoming black as night and spiking in every direction. The world became exposed to him once more as his VR helmet pushed itself to the top of his head. It went from sleek metal and plastic to red cloth, leaving him with a red and white baseball cap. It was rather fortunate this happened, as Luckey shrunk down a bit, now too small to properly wear the original helmet. The mental rewiring happened almost instantaneously, and Luckey was no more.

Ash: epsilon blinked and looked around the unfamiliar room. He gasped in surprise at his new surroundings. At least Pikachu was there, and his five Pokemon were in his pocket, so he wasn’t afraid. Turning to the window, he found four other Ashes- his brothers, he realized- outside, waving at him. He opened the window and snuck outside with Pikachu jumping after him, leaving behind the remains of the VRXZ. The screen lit up for a moment, showing a Pikachu winking before going black once again.

Victim 6
MARIA SUSAN SMITH, AGE 86
MOTHER OF A BLIZZARD EXEC.

“Breaking news! There have been reports of changes occurring all across the country! Hundreds of cartoon children have been seen wandering the streets of Chicago! They’ve managed to get their hands on high-level transformative technology somehow, and are converting more and more people into- look out!”

The news program went totally dead as it melted into static, but that didn’t bother old Maria one bit. Her television was as ancient as her, and it would occasionally fade out and fade back in. She just had to be patient and wait for her news program to come back on.

Maria wore her grey hair in a bun, with her aged blue eyes hidden behind thick glasses. She was somewhat stout and wore a green dress with tacky white flowers on it. It was a favorite dress of her’s, and she’d owned it for years.

The little old woman waddled around her room in the Los Angeles Central Old Age Home, the biggest and best of its kind. About three-hundred elderly people called this place their home. Only the wealthy could afford to send their family members here, but they were assured that they would be well cared for.

However, even the best old age home wasn’t completely safe. Outside Maria’s room, Charizard, Gliscor and Noivern landed in the shadows. Ash: prime, Ash: epsilon and Ash: gamma returned their Pokemon to their balls as the entered the automatic doors.

There was only one receptionist in the lonely entryway, which was decorated in soothing blues and greens. No chrome here- it would hurt they eyes of the elderly. Even the blonde young woman behind the desk seemed friendly and unthreatening. So it made the Ashes feel a bit guilty when they jabbed a needle into her neck to trigger some changes.

A little.

Ash: prime allowed it. The Hunter would understand. This was the plan they all agreed upon. They couldn’t afford to leave witnesses. The needle was rather fast-acting, and the receptionist was too stunned by her changes to do anything about the Ashes.

“Where is Maria Susan Smith’s room?” Ash: beta asked.

“Where- where- whe- third floor, room fifty- why- why-” the woman stuttered as that knowledge- and all knowledge unrelated to eating and Pokemon- evaded her.

“Thank you!” Ash: beta said cheerfully as they left the unfortunate receptionist and boarded the nearest elevator.

Thirty seconds after they left, another Ash and Pikachu were standing in place of the receptionist and her handbag, respectively. Ash realized he must save his brothers. Looking down, he noticed that there was a little green bomb that his freed brothers dropped. He didn’t really know what it did, but maybe it could help.

Back on Maria's floor, the static of the television was drowned out by a series of ding-dongs at the doorbell. Maria rarely got visitors, so her eyes lit up with joy as she went to the door. She was shocked to see a small army of identical-looking children. Because her vision was failing her, she didn't register their animated state. She did, however, notice the Pikachus moving.

"Oh my, how adorable," she said. "Are those animatronic toys you boys have there?"

In actual fact, animatronic toys fell out of style somewhere around the 2030's, when VR became big. But poor old Maria didn't really remember that. Ash: prime held out his hand silently, as if he wanted a handshake. Maria complied, unaware there was a hidden, hand-buzzer device in his right palm. the silver machine clicked and- with a quick pinch- delivered a fluid created only to transform others.

Maria didn't really feel it. She only felt a bit of unease as the boys entered her home and began to look around.

"What about the Pikachu?" Ash: gamma asked their unofficial leader.

"Let's look around," Ash: prime replied.

The Ashes found a fuzzy-looking but slightly musty pillow that would do the trick, and Ash: prime grasped it carefully with his left hand. It instantly grew four limbs and began to flail around.

"Pikaaaaaaa!" the pillow wailed with its new mouth.

Now, old Maria had poor vision, but her hearing was surprisingly sharp. She turned to the sound as her world turned even more blurry than normal. The reason was her new, anime-style eyes, which didn't need glasses. Concerned for the pillow- she'd owned it forever!- Maria walked over to it with the stride of a younger person. Her body- bloated with age- slimmed down, replaced with that of a young boy.

Maria took her baggy dress carefully in one hand as she approached the pillow, still unaware that there was anything wrong. Two ears with black tips shot out of the pillow as it went from beige to a bright yellow. A pair of beady eyes blinked up at her as the "pillow" continued to thrash around, more scared than Maria was.

"Oh, you poor dear," Maria said to it, her voice like that of the Ashes but her personality still intact for the time being.

Maria picked the scared "pillow" up and stroked it as her hair took on the same color and style as the other Ashes, although it was a bit softer. Her dress slipped, but this was soon rectified as it became a blue and white striped shirt and a pair of brown pants. The "pillowchu" mewled weakly, then began to purr as sneakers and a baseball cap appeared on Maria. Her glasses slipped off and shattered, no longer needed. To finish the changes, there was a flash of light and a sparkling watch made itself known as it came into existence around her left wrist.

It was this watch and its yellow crystal that captivated the other Ashes. None of the others had anything like that! Still, they had to make sure that now fully changed Pikachu wouldn't be alone.

"Do you have your other Pokemon, Ash?" Ash: delta asked.

Ash: zeta- for his name had always been Ash- allowed Pikachu to board his shoulder as he reached into his pocket. There were five PokeBalls there. He nodded. The six of them smiled, as did their Pikachu friends. At last, all of them were freed!

While they celebrated, the former receptionist stared in wonder as the co-workers he attacked in the employee lounge looked like varying versions of himself, and most of the objects in the room became Pikachus and PokeBalls. They looked around at one another sternly. They all had one goal in mind- to free their brothers.

How they acquired the tech was a mystery, but the Ash army suddenly expanded as it grabbed as much tech as it could. The changes spread eastward, all the way back to New York- where it all began.

The Hunter was relaxing at home with his ten million dollars, sent fresh from Nintendo. Well, not literally of course. But he was enjoying having the huge amount of money he received. He was never paid this handsomely for any of his jobs. The previous record was somewhere along the one-million line from someone he couldn't quite remember.

Ten million. Ten million!

The Hunter was so lost in thought that didn't notice the door open, nor did he notice the ten-year-old boy enter the room he was in. Only when he heard the crackling of his own transformation gun- which he left by the door- did he pay any attention. By that point, it was too late. The gun fired and hit home, changing him inside and out. He screamed and writhed about as his brain was reprogrammed.

Brothers. He must find his brothers.

It only took a few months for the rest of America to fall to what was dubbed as the Ketchum Plague, thanks to all the tech the Ashes discovered in the Hunter's home. Some called it the "Ashpocalypse" online, but that didn't last long since the Internet was soon downed. Nintendo's stock plummeted overnight, but it wasn't long until they had bigger fish to fry as the Plague spread to their country. By the new year, all of the first world powers had fallen, and it wasn't much longer until the rest of the planet submitted to the Plague as well.

With that, there were no new brothers to find. Or were there? Perhaps in other times, or in other dimensions, there were more people waiting to be changed. Maybe there's even a person like the one who is nearing the end of this tragic tale.

The moral of this story is a simple one. Do not submit to the sins of greed, carelessness and sloth, *lest the earth shall turn to Ash.*